

*A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Self-Examination in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Chinese Philosophy and Tragedy.*

Daoyu Shi, Kunming University of Science and Technology, China

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**Abstract**

Western culture and Chinese culture are two completely different cultural systems in the world, while both of them can be analyzed together at a microscopic level. Although the protagonists in Chinese drama are not as complex as in Shakespearean drama where the characters are shaped by more than two aspects, the struggle of personality can be displayed in both. Consequently, in this paper, I will argue that the ideology of the self exists in *Hamlet* and Confucian texts. More specifically, through a comparison of Confucian ideology with western ideology, *Hamlet* can be analyzed in a cultural way that separately compares western ideology and Confucianism, Chinese drama and Shakespearean drama, and thus I will argue that some special characteristics belong to both Hamlet and Confucianism such as self-fashioning, self-revising, self-examination, and the desire to achieve an equilibrium (the “middle course”). I will then particularly analyze the tragedy of Ophelia, which relates Shakespearean drama with Chinese drama. This tragedy differs from Hamlet's and is an unadulterated and deep tragedy for all. Since Shakespeare's eminence was located in his creation of multiple selves, when analyzing Hamlet, we can also analyze the selves in it, and then compare it with the corresponding consciousness in Confucianism to conduct cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Self-Awareness, Cross-Cultural, Philosophy

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of writing this paper is to combine my own experience and ideas to explore the human behavior and qualities in the great dramas of the Renaissance, and to bring a kind of inspiration to contemporary people. In the process of continuous research, I associated the consciousness of self-examination in Chinese Confucianism with Hamlet through analyzing Hamlet's behavior. Consequently, my tutor believes that this paper includes very interesting and insightful points.

## **Body**

Under the influence of multiple factors such as cultural circumstances, Chinese drama and Shakespearean plays have a lot of different characteristics. Tragedies and comedies in Shakespeare's drama and traditional Chinese drama shows the obvious discrepancy between the two. Firstly, in Shakespeare's tragedy, the main characters are heroes such as kings or princes who do not need to obey anyone, while in Chinese tragedies, morality is the main theme (Zhang, 24-26). In the former, the protagonist has a tragic flaw and is not morally perfect. In the latter, the protagonist is morally perfect who is virtuous and loyal. Secondly, Shakespeare's tragedy has all kinds of conflicts and paradoxes, and it is difficult to classify them as good or bad, while Chinese tragedies present stereotypical conflicts and divide the world into good and evil (Zhang, 27-29). Thirdly, Shakespeare's heroes always act on their initiative or have more inner monologues because they have greater freedom of choice, while Chinese traditional protagonists do not possess such great inner conflict (Zhang, 30-31). Finally, although traditional Chinese drama can create a tragic atmosphere, they always end with a happy ending, and Shakespeare's plays do not possess this condition (Zhang, 32-33). Consequently, by comparing the differences between Chinese drama and Shakespearean drama, the characteristics of Shakespeare's drama become clearer. However, existing differences not mean that they cannot relate with each other. For instance, Zhang states that Chinese scholars of Shakespeare often regard Hamlet as a Confucian hero. According to Zhang, most Chinese scholars analyze Hamlet in connection with his family and social identity, and ignore his hesitation as the essence of human nature. Then how can we analyze Hamlet in a Confucian way?

When Hamlet is analyzed using cultural approaches, Hamlet is analyzed through the lens of Confucianism. According to Zhang, though Confucianism declined during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the mid to late twentieth century, traditional Chinese culture still plays an important role in the social and cultural practices of the Chinese today(211). Zhang's analysis shows that it can be said that Confucianism is still a means for Chinese people to analyze specific behaviors. For example, Zhang states that Confucianism makes Chinese scholars focus on Hamlet's positive qualities, but that ignores his negative qualities, such as his hesitation and vacillation, which Chinese scholars attribute to the corrupt society rather than to Hamlet's inner nature (Zhang, 214). However, it is important to note that this kind of analysis of two different cultures should occur independently. We cannot forcibly mix two completely different cultures into a whole, nor can we take the correspondence between the two cultures as a matter of course. Instead, the goal should be to maintain a multiplex and dialectical comprehension. Therefore, when we use cultural means to analyze Hamlet, the methods and Confucianism are inseparable. In this way, the

analysis of self-awareness can also be analyzed and compared.

Some early self-conscious bodies have self-fashioning and self-revision. Looking through the history of selves, while self-consciousness is not as strong as it is in modern times, selves certainly exist in the 16th century, as Greenblatt states(1-2). According to Greenblatt, it is easy to recognize that the characters in *Hamlet* also possess self-awareness. No matter what kind of aspect they are changing, they are all thinking about themselves in a way that cannot be separated from reality. More specifically, in Shakespeare's time, the modern sense of self was developing in a variety of ways via self-fashioning and self-revision. In the 16th century, the shaping of human identity was regarded as a manipulable, ingenious process (Greenblatt, 2). At this time, the term "fashion" was considered to have formed itself. Nevertheless, the process of self-fashioning is also influenced by the external environment, since the world in *Hamlet* is not one far away from society or without God (Greenblatt, 2). The protagonists have unconstrained subjectivity, but are defined by their present society and ideology (Greenblatt, 256). However, according to Bloom, Hamlet's journey closely approaches revising the sense of "selfsame". He changes his will after doing "self-overhearing", rather than precisely fashioned by environment (411). Consequently, he argues that Hamlet does not do "self-fashioning" but "self-revision". This process of self-revision is reflected in Hamlet's hesitation, which affects his choices on the road of revenge and contributes to the remarkable tragedy of Shakespeare. In this sense, although those self-conscious are inconsistent, Hamlet indeed possess from the beginning to end.

A key aspect of self-fashioning and self-revision that Confucianism shares with Shakespeare is the concept of self-examination. In Confucianism, Tsang states, "Thrice daily I ask myself: Have I been unfaithful in dealing with others? Have I been untrue to friends? Do I practice what I preach (*Analects*, 1.5)?" It can be interpreted that self-examination exists in Confucianism since the superior man, the so-called gentleman in Western countries, is perfecting himself through constant self-examination in order to achieve a state of balance. In Confucianism, self-examination, as the name implies, means introspection, and it is not a simple judgment of right and wrong or good and evil, but resolutely positive, guiding people to develop in a good direction. Moreover, in Confucianism self-examination is more directional than self-fashioning since it enables people to choose positive people or things from their surroundings to learn and think. The Master said, "At the sight of worth, think to grow like it. When evil meets thee, search thine own heart (*Analects*, 4.5)." And the Master also said that "walking three together I am sure of teachers. I pick out the good and follow it; I see the bad and shun it (*Analects*, 7.10)." That means, becoming a superior man or perfectly self-examination, is more dependent on individual autonomy than being blindly affected. Individuals are autonomous and selective when choosing "teachers".

Incorporate the ideas in this passage into the following paragraph on Hamlet:

When Hamlet is on the boat to England and sees Fortinbras' army invading Poland, he is inspired to take action as the soldiers do. In this way, Hamlet did derive bloody fighting determination from soldiers and made him made up his mind, returning home to report his father's revenge. Say in other words, he indeed learns something positive from "teachers". Proverbs that instruct people on how to talk and act in Confucianism can be used to interpret the nature of humans in Hamlet. The essence of introspection

is to make itself behave following the existing basic moral and ethical concepts through repeated thinking. Shakespeare defines a similar concept. Hamlet's psychology is based on the concept of self-examination. In the text, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz that "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it one (Act 2.2, Hamlet)." For this complex ideological reason, instead of considering the purpose of introspection as to become a perfect person, self-examination is simply the conclusion that things have a unique self-awareness.

Like Confucianism, Hamlet also exhibits this behavior of self-examination. In Act 3 Scene 1, Lord Polonius states, "We are oft to blame in this, 'Tis too much proved that with devotion's visage. And pious action we do sugar o'er the devil himself" (Act 3.1). Shakespeare directly indicates the subjectivity also can be a cloth to make someone change himself as being a different person. And the higher class or money people possess, the more possible it is for them to change their subjectivity. In this way, Hamlet seizes the opportunity to successfully revenge his father's death, but the inner self-examination makes him hesitate in the killing. In Act 3 Scene 3, Hamlet states, "when he is fit and seasoned for his passage? No! Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent" (Act 3.3). Although the audience would normally be against the idea of bloody vengeance, Shakespeare makes us sympathize with Hamlet and the ghost by portraying the behavior of Hamlet as charitable and against the ideas of fratricide and incest. In Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 2, he states that "but I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall, to make oppression bitter, or ere this, I should have fatted all the region kites with this slave's offal" (Act 2.2). In this passage, Hamlet concludes his self-examination, explaining the reason for his inaction and hesitant mental state. Consequently, aside from the development of the plot, self-examination makes Hamlet develop a clear attitude towards the problem during his greatest monologue "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (Act 3.1). He is considering "Whether 'tis nobler", which can be seen as an equilibrium. In this sense, it is a way of self-examination, that "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles". Ultimately, the purpose of self-examination is to implement an auto-criticism and achieve a state of inner balance.

Yet, Hamlet's metaphysical way of thinking is not completely defined by self-examination, which exists as only a part of subjectivity. As the Master said in Confucianism, "Study without thought is vain; thought without study is dangerous (*Analects*, 2.8)." In this sense, in the play Hamlet is in danger of hesitation and inaction and loses his ability of self-examination. Hamlet is in an unbalanced state after talking with the ghost and, although he tells others that he was going to "put an antic disposition on," in the end he is out of control (Act 1.5). Moreover, as we have seen, in Act 3.1, Shakespeare directly indicates that subjectivity is also can be a cloth to make someone change himself as being a different person. Even it does not reflect the existence of self-awareness. Francis Barker defined a kind of subjection in which self-awareness is not enough to be determined by subjective conditions such as location and expression, and manifested through the consciousness of incorporating physical action (Young, 36). For example, during a conversation with his mother, Hamlet killed Polonius by mistake. It was judged that Hamlet lost his mind at that moment, and his introspective cognition and behavior did not agree with one another. Before that, he gave up the opportunity to kill Claudius because of his "praying" (Act 3.3.). However, suddenly Hamlet kills Polonius after turning around. This absurd accident intimates that Hamlet did not possess self-examination at this moment. Thus

Hamlet cannot be regarded as completely defined by self-examination.

To some extent, equilibrium can be said to be the highest degree of self-examination. "The Golden Mean (Zhong Yong)", whether in ancient China or ancient Greece, has always involved the category of value judgment and value orientation, not the category of cognitive dimension (Huang, 3). Whether it is what Confucius calls "the Golden Mean" or Plato or Aristotle's "the Golden Mean", it is all used in the value dimension of life (Huang, 3). That means, from a dramatic perspective, equilibrium should more focus on personal value dimensions, such as how to achieve the middle course (best state) through self-examination (the guidance of knowledge and rationality). In Confucianism, it can be defined by *The Doctrine of the Mean*, representing moderation and objectivity. The master writes:

Therefore the superior man (Jun Zi) is watchful over himself when he is alone. While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of Harmony. This equilibrium is the great root of which grow all the human actions in the world, and this Harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish. (3)

This doctrine argues that humans are in a process of continuous self-improvement. From an environmental self-fashioning to true self-examination, the balance is finally reached. That means human should possess a sense of self-examination from outside influences. Not blindly being self-fashioning, but through self-revision to achieve a balanced state of introspection. The uncertainty of human nature makes this drama more colorful. While there is no such balance and perfection in Hamlet, one thing that evokes this sense of equilibrium is the power relationship in Hamlet. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chung-ni, a Chinese Confucian scholar states, "The superior man embodies the course of the Mean is because he is a superior man, and so always maintains the Mean; the mean man acts contrary to the course of the Mean. The superior man's embodying the course of Man is because he is a mean man, and so always maintains the Mean. The mean man's acting contrary to the course of the Mean is because he is a mean man, and has no caution" (15). In this play, Claudius, who is "incestuous, adulterate and traitorous man", can be defined by the term "mean man" (Act 1.4). He killed the old king who is a perfect man, through a wicked and evil scheme. Although he has repented and confessed in the play, when Hamlet threatens his interests, he still chooses to kill Hamlet. The mean of Claudius, which is nature thing to him, makes him be shameless. His nature determines his impudent. It also proves that Claudius cannot achieve self-examination or equilibrium. In fact, the Golden Mean is just an extremely ideal state, and only a few of the characters in *Hamlet* can follow them. To some extent, drama is the style of analyzing the characters and life, which is closer to reality. Therefore, over-interpretation through the perspective may be woefully counterproductive.

Back to Self-examination, it does not only affect Hamlet, but also indirectly influence Ophelia. Consequently, Ophelia becomes the most tragic character in *Hamlet* and even in traditional Chinese drama. As I mentioned before, the characters in Shakespearean drama are complicated, while Ophelia seems to be the exception. Two indirect factors are to be found in the experience of Ophelia. To begin with, she

accidentally knows that her father was killed by Hamlet. Consequently, she becomes insane and finally commits suicide out of desperation. Moreover, Ophelia is partly tricked by Hamlet in their unrecognized relationship. In this way, Ophelia is hardly in a dominant position, and is forced to learn so-called truths—that her lover suddenly no longer loves her, and even her father is killed by him. Meanwhile, compared to the male characters, her behavior is impeccable without any calculations, and certainly, there is no blood on her hands. As Zhang states, “Ophelia, as a model of a perfect and innocent human being, has been killed by herself, so that people must pitifully bring unrestrained sadness back to Ophelia herself” (29). Significantly, the case of Ophelia also corresponds to characteristics of traditional Chinese drama. The protagonists of traditional Chinese tragedies often encompass women, and the “tragic mood” is motivated by “the suffering and destruction of the women” (Zhang, 24). Moreover, one major theme of traditional Chinese tragedy is about the “sorrows of qie (concubines, or women from the middle or lower classes) over their misfortunes in love” (Zhang, 24-25). In this way, while Ophelia cannot be defined by a true lover of Hamlet, it is easier to regard Ophelia as a Confucian tragic character, as she resembles the characters in Confucian works. There are many such proverbial female roles in Confucian literature, such as Lady Yang (a Chinese tragedy character), who has similar experience with Ophelia. Emperor Tang Ming gives her too much power, which puts her in danger and eventually leads to the tragedy of Lady Yang. To some extent, Lady Yang and Ophelia are the same sympathetic.

Moreover, the ending of Ophelia’s story is particularly affiliated with Hamlet’s problem of self-examination, revealing another affinity between Ophelia and Confucianism. First, though at first he confessed his love to her enthusiastically and even her father was almost moved in their relationship, Hamlet does not self-examine their relationship and his judgment towards Ophelia. Hamlet is blinded by his ambition or revenge, which indirectly results in her tragic death after he loses his mind towards the real world and the surroundings he lives. Moreover, Hamlet’s attitude towards love is also influenced by the words of Ghost, who states, “That it went hand in hand even with the vow I made to her in marriage, and to decline upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor To those of mine” (Act 1.5). Because of his mother’s betrayal, Hamlet then chooses to say to Ophelia that “(I) did love you once,” but “it hath made (me) mad” (Act 3.1, Hamlet), and that he has partly thought that “for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness” (Act, 3.1, Hamlet). However, it is well-known that it is not the case. Dramatically, his concealed self-examination reappears in Ophelia’s obsequies. He thinks that he “loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum” (Act 5.1). At that moment, self-examination can no longer change the fact that Ophelia commits suicide. Obviously, if he could keep self-examination in mind, Ophelia’s ending would not be so miserable. Hamlet’s self-examination not only affects himself but also those closest to him.

## **Conclusion**

According to Bloom, Shakespeare’s characters exemplify the invention of the human and the birth of the idea of personality as we now understand these concepts use these terms and concepts (4). In this sense, comparing such ideology in Confucianism and *Hamlet* does make sense. From a micro perspective, self-revision is closer to Hamlet’s

characteristics than self-fashioning. Moreover, through Hamlet's monologue, it can also be perceived that Hamlet is in a state of self-examination and equilibrium. Finally, the strength of self-examination indirectly affects the destiny of Ophelia which led to the tragedy of Ophelia and the death of many characters, and also the tragedy is meaning for in traditional Chinese drama. There are, however, certain problems with this line of interpretation. As a result of many complicated reasons such as culture and history, Confucianism and Shakespeare's drama cannot completely correspond to each other. The ideology that may exist in *Hamlet* can only be analyzed from a very micro-perspective. Nevertheless, in this approach, self-examination certainly can be regarded as a cross-culture value, which is also an important value in many different countries. Moreover, this cross-cultural ideological communication makes the characters richly more colorful and sophisticated, feeling Hamlet from a Chinese perspective.

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